

DINE

A tidy time for diners at Loose Ends

by Maria Gallagher

Daily News Restaurant Critic

The 500 block of Station Avenue in Haddon Heights, N.J., has become a restaurant row of sorts. In that block alone are a Chinese restaurant, an Italian restaurant, a pizzeria and Loose Ends, a delightful storefront restaurant with a sophisticated Euro-Mediterranean menu that draws on France, Italy and Spain.

Anticipation is part of the enjoyment at Loose Ends. The menu descriptions of the various seafood, veal and chicken dishes were so enticing that our party took far longer than usual to make decisions. A few odd combinations — chicken with crabmeat, veal with mussels — practically dare customers to order them.

We passed on the veal with mussels, but if it is like the rest of our meal, it's likely to be good. The kitchen uses only the freshest ingredients, and the menu has a season-conscious slant, with plenty of seafood and light, cream-free sauces. The efficient serving staff gets a hand for reciting prices with the day's specials; the no-smoking policy is laudable. The chairs are not as comfortable as I would like.

A seafood-loving partner was thrilled to hear a chilled seafood sampler (\$7.95) listed among the appetizer specials. It included two very plump mussels, two large shrimp, two sea scallops and a tomato stuffed with crabmeat, all drizzled with a colorful red bell pepper mayonnaise.

Grilled polenta (\$5.50), an appetizer that's grown in popularity in the last two years, gets a distinctive spin here. The cornmeal cake is set atop wild mushrooms and tiny bits of smoked duck breast in a delicious balsamic vinegar reduction. The polenta is the perfect medium for soaking up every bit of the sauce.

Sauteed scallops in puff pastry (\$5.50), with a sheer,

REVIEW

Loose Ends

★★ \$5

517 Station Ave., Haddon Heights, N.J., 609-546-9777.

Lunch: 11 a.m.-3 p.m. Monday-Friday.

Dinner: 5-9 p.m. Wednesday and Thursday; till 10 p.m. Friday and Saturday.

Liquor: No liquor license. BYOB.

Accessibility: Restroom not modified.

Credit: Major cards.

Atmosphere: Sophisticated storefront restaurant.

★ = Good ★★ = Very Good

★★★ = Great

No Stars = Needs Work

\$ = Average entree under \$10

\$5 = Average entree under \$15

\$15 = Average entree over \$15

slightly sweet sauce and a confetti of red and green bell pepper, intrigued the Haddon Heights native who ordered it. The server explained that the sweetness came from a Pernod-like Spanish liquor added to the pan. The sprig of fresh tarragon on the plate — and the thyme branches alongside the polenta — underscored the restaurant's commitment to fresh herbs.

House salads, included with dinner, were a mix of greens with a choice of dressings that tasted homemade.

Chicken Crustacean (\$15), one of those dishes that begged to be tried, wasn't at all bizarre. Some very good crabmeat is used more as a condiment than a companion to a whole sauteed chicken breast, along with a mix of mushrooms, tomatoes and herbs.

Veal sauteed with artichoke hearts (\$15.50), one of my favorite dishes, did not disappoint. The three nickel-thin medallions and generous number of artichoke hearts were served with an amply garlicked fresh tomato sauce.

Tilapia, a mild, white-fleshed fish, remained moist after being baked with a Provençal-style topping of tomato, capers, black olives, white wine and olive oil (\$13.50).

A white-and-wild rice mix

came with the chicken and fish; potato rounds came with the veal. All three entrees arrived with a medley of zucchini, yellow squash and carrots.

From a dessert tray, the hit of the table was a wedge of what seemed like solid chocolate set in a pool of raspberry sauce. This is one of those too-rich-to-finish numbers. Cheesecake likewise made a good impression. The Haddon Heights native pouted over his firm square of croissant bread pudding and pronounced it boring (his bride had talked him into ordering it).

There's no liquor license; customers are welcome to bring their own bottles. There are a few charges to be aware of — \$1.50 for opening wine; \$7.50 for sharing an entree. If possible, avoid the wobbly table nearest the kitchen.



WORTH A VISIT

Summaries of recent reviews by Daily News restaurant critic Maria Gallagher. All restaurants are visited anonymously; the date the review was published is noted in parentheses. The Daily News pays for all meals.

AMARA CAFE, 106 S. 22nd St., 564-6976. This small, chef-owned restaurant — a little noisy when the room is full — would be a good place to introduce a wary diner to Thai food. Prices are low and the mood is casual. The healthful entrees are followed by sinful desserts. Open for lunch Monday-Friday, dinner Monday-Saturday. BYOB. ★★ \$ (5/17/91)

BAAN THAI, 2005 Walnut St., 564-2585. A serene stop in Center City with caring service and better-than-average Thai fare. Spicing is a walk on the mild side. Desserts are all-American. Open for lunch and dinner daily. BYOB. ★★ \$ (6/21/91)

BACI, 211 S. Broad St., 731-0700. Even if you haven't yet visited Baci on Broad near Walnut, you may already have been there. If you're familiar with Stuzzi or Marabella's or Stazi Milano, you'll feel right at home at Baci, which follows the same formula: breezy, hip Italian grills designed for audiences who might want a pizza on one visit, a multi-course dinner on another. Knockout appetizer: grilled polenta with grilled portobello mushrooms. Desserts, including fantastic profiteroles, are displayed in a case at the entrance. However, we can do without the \$9 cabarets. Live jazz at night. Open Monday-Friday for lunch, nightly for dinner. ★★ \$ (12/20/91)

LE BAR LYONNAIS AT BEC-FIN, 1523 Walnut St., 567-1000. Here you can sample the elegance of Le Bec-Fin at a fraction of the usual cost. Le Bar Lyonnais, an addition to this much-loved French restaurant, serves a light menu from noon to midnight Monday-Friday, and from 5:30 p.m. on Saturday. Everything except the caviar is under \$12. Don't pass up the sharing-size sampler plate of pastries from the very cart that caters to the big cigars upstairs. A lovely place for an after-dinner drink or after-theater dessert. Closed Sundays. ★★ \$ (3/22/91)

See Next Page

What's new

Yet another Bassett's Original Turkey location opened this week. It's at 1635 Market St. ... The chef at Chattanooga's Restaurant, Bar and Grill at 523 W. Lancaster Ave. in Wayne is David Wentz, a former executive chef of La Fourchette. Pizzas, sandwiches and "comfort food" entrees, priced from \$8.95-\$15.50, are on the menu.

Sniff, sniff

How accurate is your sense of smell? The American Institute of Wine and Food offers a chance to find out at 2:30 p.m. Sunday at the Monell Chemical Senses Center, 3500 Market St. Meet the scientists who conduct smell studies, take part in blind taste and smell studies, and see what your nose knows. Cost: \$10. Free to AIWF members. Reservations: 635-4463.

Feast in Franklin Town

A dozen Fairmount dining spots are teaming up for a food festival on Sunday from 4:30 p.m. till dark to benefit the just-christened Franklin Town Park, between 18th and 19th and Callowhill and Buttonwood streets. Proceeds will be used to maintain the park.

Suds & supper

The Samuel Adams Brew House, 1516 Sansom St., hosts a beer-tasting dinner starting at 6:30 p.m. Tuesday. The beer-friendly menu includes stuffed grape leaves, oysters on the half shell, shrimp gazpacho, ginger sorbet and sauteed soft-shell crabs. The beers are made on the premises. Cost: \$30. Reservations: 563-2326.

Information for Eats Beat should be sent two weeks in advance to Food & Home, Philadelphia Daily News, Box 7788, Philadelphia, Pa. 19101.

